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## Bowling Together

*Robert D. Putnam*

The closing decades of the twentieth century found Americans growing ever less connected with one another and with collective life. We voted less, joined less, gave less, trusted less, invested less time in public affairs, and engaged less with our friends, our neighbors, and even our families. Our "we" steadily shriveled.

The unspeakable tragedy of September 11 dramatically interrupted that trend. Almost instantly, we rediscovered our friends, our neighbors, our public institutions, and our shared fate. Nearly two years ago, I wrote in my book *Bowling Alone* that restoring civic engagement in America "would be eased by a palpable national crisis, like war or depression or natural disaster, but for better and for worse, America at the dawn of the new century faces no such galvanizing crisis."

Now we do.

But is September 11 a period that puts a full stop to one era and opens a new, more community-minded chapter in our history? Or is it merely a comma, a brief pause during which we looked up for a moment and then returned to our solitary pursuits? In short, how thoroughly and how enduringly have American values and civic habits been transformed by the terrorist attacks of last fall?

During the summer and fall of 2000, my colleagues and I conducted a [nationwide survey](#) of civic attitudes and behaviors, asking about everything from voting to choral singing, newspaper readership to interracial marriage. Recently, we returned to many of the same people and posed the same questions. Our survey period

extended from mid-October to mid-November 2001, encompassing the anthrax crisis and the start of the Afghan war. Emerging from the immediate trauma of unspeakable death and destruction, these 500 Americans were adjusting to a changed world and a changed nation.

Though the immediate effect of the attacks was clearly devastating, most Americans' personal lives returned to normal relatively quickly. For example, despite anecdotal reports of increased religious observance in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, we found no evidence of any change in religiosity or in reported church attendance. Our primary concern, however, was not with change in the private lives of Americans but with the implications of the attacks and their aftermath for American civic life. And in those domains, we found unmistakable evidence of change.

The levels of political consciousness and engagement are substantially higher than they were a year ago in the United States. In fact, they are probably higher now than they have been in at least three decades. Trust in government, trust in the police, and interest in politics are all up. Compared with a year ago, Americans are somewhat more likely to have attended a political meeting or to have worked on a community project. Conversely, we are less likely to agree that "the people running my community do not really care what I think." This is no doubt partly the result of a spurt of patriotism and "rally round the flag" sentiment, but it also reflects a sharper appreciation of public institutions' role in addressing not just terrorism but other urgent national issues. The result? A dramatic and probably unprecedented burst of enthusiasm for the federal government.

Using a standard question ("How much can you trust the government in Washington to do what is right--all of the time, most of the time, some of the time, or none of the time?"), we found that 51 percent of our respondents expressed greater confidence in the federal government in 2001 than they had a year earlier. No doubt the identity of the commander in chief has something to do with the somewhat greater increase in confidence among Republicans, southerners, and whites; even before September 11, the advent of a Republican administration probably changed the partisan polarity of

this question. Nevertheless, the bipartisan, nationwide effect of the terrorist attacks and their aftermath is clear.

Although we found most of the changes in civic attitudes to be relatively uniform across ethnic groups, social classes, and regions, some registered more sharply among younger Americans (those aged 35 and under) than among their elders. Interest in public affairs, for example, grew by 27 percent among younger people, as compared with 8 percent among older respondents. Trust in "the people running your community" grew by 19 percent among younger people, as compared with 4 percent among older ones.

Nonetheless, Americans from all walks of life expressed greater interest in public affairs than they had during the national political campaign of 2000. This spike in political awareness has not, however, led most Americans to run out and join community organizations or to show up for club meetings that they used to shun. Generally speaking, attitudes (such as trust and concern) have shifted more than behavior has. Will behavior follow attitudes? It's an important question. And if the answer is no, then the blossom of civic-mindedness after September 11 may be short-lived.

Americans don't only trust political institutions more: We also trust one another more, from neighbors and co-workers to shop clerks and perfect strangers. More Americans now express confidence that people in their community would cooperate, for example, with voluntary conservation measures in an energy or water shortage. In fact, in the wake of the terrorist attacks, more Americans reported having cooperated with their neighbors to resolve common problems. Fewer of us feel completely isolated socially, in the sense of having no one to turn to in a personal crisis. At the same time, we are now less likely to have friends over to visit. Television viewing increased from about 2.9 hours to 3.4 hours a day. In that sense, whether because of fear or because of the recession, Americans are cocooning more now than a year ago.

We were especially surprised and pleased to find evidence of enhanced trust across ethnic and other social divisions. Whites trust

blacks more, Asians trust Latinos more, and so on, than these very same people did a year ago. An identical pattern appears in response to classic questions measuring social distance: Americans in the fall of 2001 expressed greater open-mindedness toward intermarriage across ethnic and racial lines, even within their own families, than they did a year earlier.

To be sure, trust toward Arab Americans is now about 10 percent below the level expressed toward other ethnic minorities. We had not had the foresight to ask about trust in Arab Americans a year ago, so we cannot be certain that it has declined, but it seems likely that it has. Similarly, we find that Americans are somewhat more hostile to immigrant rights. Other surveys have shown that public skepticism about immigration increased during 2001, but that trend may reflect the recession as much as it does the terrorist attacks. Yet despite signs of public support for antiterrorist law-enforcement techniques that may intrude on civil liberties, our survey found that Americans are in some respects more tolerant of cultural diversity now than they were a year ago. Opposition to the exclusion of "unpopular" books from public libraries actually rose from 64 percent to 71 percent. In short--with the important but partial and delimited exception of attitudes toward immigrants and Arab Americans--our results suggest that Americans feel both more united and more comfortable with the nation's diversity.

We also found that Americans have become somewhat more generous, though the changes in this domain are more limited than anecdotal reports have suggested. More people in 2001 than in 2000 reported working on a community project or donating money or blood. Occasional volunteering is up slightly, but regular volunteering (at least twice a month) remains unchanged at one in every seven Americans. Compared with figures from immediately after the tragedy, our data suggest that much of the measurable increase in generosity spent itself within a few weeks.

As 2001 ended, Americans were more united, readier for collective sacrifice, and more attuned to public purpose than we have been for several decades. Indeed, we have a more capacious sense of "we" than we have had in the adult experience of most Americans

now alive. The images of shared suffering that followed the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington suggested a powerful idea of cross-class, cross-ethnic solidarity. Americans also confronted a clear foreign enemy, an experience that both drew us closer to one another and provided an obvious rationale for public action.

In the aftermath of September's tragedy, a window of opportunity has opened for a sort of civic renewal that occurs only once or twice a century. And yet, though the crisis revealed and replenished the wells of solidarity in American communities, those wells so far remain untapped. At least, this is what that gap between attitudes and behavior suggests. Civic solidarity is what Albert Hirschman called a "moral resource"--distinctive in that, unlike a material resource, it increases with use and diminishes with disuse. Changes in attitude alone, no matter how promising, do not constitute civic renewal.

Americans who came of age just before and during World War II were enduringly molded by that crisis. All their lives, these Americans have voted more, joined more, given more. But the so-called Greatest Generation forged not merely moods and symbols, as important as those were; it also produced great national policies and institutions (such as the GI Bill) and community-minded personal practices (such as scrap drives and victory gardens). So far, however, America's new mood has expressed itself largely through images--of the attacks themselves, for instance, or the Ad Council's "I am an American" campaign, which powerfully depicts our multicultural society--and gestures, such as the president's visit to a mosque.

Images matter. What a powerful lesson in inclusive citizenship would have been imparted had FDR visited a Shinto shrine in January 1942! But images alone do not create turning points in a nation's history. That requires institutionalized change. To help foster a new "greatest generation," the Bush administration should endorse the bill offered by Senators John McCain and Evan Bayh to quintuple funds for the AmeriCorps program of national youth service. And given that young Americans are more open to political participation than they have been in many years, educational and political leaders should seize this moment to encourage youths' engagement in political and social movements. The grass-roots

movement to restore the Pledge of Allegiance in American classrooms advocates fine symbolism; but the time is right to introduce a new, more activist civics education in our schools as well.

Finally, activists should recognize that wartime mobilization can also spark progress toward social justice and racial integration, much as the experiences of World War II helped to generate the civil-rights movement of the 1950s. Americans today, our surveys suggest, are more open than ever to the idea that people of all backgrounds should be full members of our national community. Progressives should work to translate that national mood into concrete policy initiatives that bridge the ethnic and class cleavages in our increasingly multicultural society.

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Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation : Dr Stephen Coleman is director of the Hansard Society e-democracy programme and lecturer in Media and Citizenship at the London School of Economics. Dr John GÃtze is head of section in the e-government group in the Danish State Information Service. The latest Tweets from Bowling Together (@bowltogether). An @ESRC research project by @emmakjackson exploring leisure practices and urban change through the site of a London bowling alley. Film by @watchingthedark. London, England.Â You can watch our short film 'Bowling Together: Portrait of a League' here<https://www.bowltogether.org/the-films/>. 0 replies 1 retweet 4 likes. Reply.